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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a Florida educator's visit to two Swedish schools for students aged 16 to 19. The educator spent 2 days visiting Duveholmsskolan in Katrineholm (about 70 miles west of Stockholm) and 3 days visiting Wargentinsskolan in Ostersund (situated 350 miles north of Stockholm and about 200 miles south of the Arctic Circle) observing the classrooms and campuses and interviewing teachers, students, and administrators. The paper gives an overview of secondary education in Sweden and then details the happenings at a school board meeting in Katrineholm. It reports that the educational atmosphere in Sweden is relaxed and that both schools offer flexible schedules. The paper goes through a day at the schools where students are responsible, as in a true democracy. The U.S. educator did not once witness a teacher direct a student to do something. The paper questions whether U.S. educators can expect to build trust and responsibility in their own schools when they find it necessary to constantly supervise their students. Contains 11 references. (BT)

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A Climate of Trust: A Visit to Two Swedish Schools

R.D. Nordgren

Recently I visited upper secondary schools in each of two separate communities in Sweden where I experienced trusting school cultures of which I have never experienced in the U.S. These schools serve about 1500 students each, aged sixteen to nineteen, roughly one year older than American high school students. The first school was Duveholmsskolan in Katrineholm, about 70 miles west of Stockholm; the second was Wargentinsskolan in Ostersund, situated 350 miles north of Stockholm and about 200 miles south of the Arctic Circle.

In Katrineholm, my host was the school superintendent who graciously allowed me access to one of the two upper secondary schools in his city of 32,000 (upper secondary schools serve sixteen through nineteen year olds). An assistant principal was my guide and host in Ostersund, a community that also has two upper secondary schools serving a population of 55,000 citizens. Compulsory education in Sweden is age seven through sixteen, meaning attendance at Duveholmsskolan and Wargentinsskolan is purely optional although the *Skolverket* (Swedish Department of Education) reports that 98% of sixteen year olds attend upper secondary schools and nearly all complete their studies (1997). I spent two days at Duveholmsskolan and three at Wargentinsskolan observing classrooms and the campus, interviewing teachers, students, and administrators at both schools.

My hosts and about thirty other Swedish education leaders visited schools in my home state of Florida in March of 1999, followed by forty Florida educators visiting Swedish schools in October. These visits were sponsored by the International School Connection (ISC), a collaboration of seven universities in seven countries, including Sweden and the U.S., whose goal is to prepare youth for success in the Global Village. Two key results of the visits were Swedes comments of our infatuation with control in schools and the American education leaders feelings that the level of trust in Swedish schools appeared much greater than in the states (School Management Institute, 1999). During my visits to Duveholmsskolan and Wargentinsskolan, I focused on the dimensions and importance of trust in their learning environments.

Swedish schools underwent a great deal of restructuring during the 1980's and '90's causing control to be transferred from the *Skolverket* to each individual municipality (1997). This placement of power nearer to the people is known in Sweden as *narhetsprincipen* or the "principal of subsidiary." Sixteen national programs are offered in each community, each career-focused; Duveholmsskolan and Wargentinsskolan have approximately one-half of these programs each with their neighboring schools in Katrineholm and Ostersund providing the others. Research in organizational trust suggests that when controls decrease, trust increases (De Furia, 1996; Kramer, 1999; Caudron, 1996). If this is indeed the case, the *Riksdag* (Swedish Parliament) did Swedish schools a great favor in loosening federal control of schooling. This was evident from my observations.

An educational school board meeting

On my second night in Katrineholm, I attended a school board meeting in that was loosely structured and intentionally educational. The five members represented the different major political parties in Sweden, and were joined by the city manager and the superintendent. The city manager opened the meeting with a five-minute speech on the importance of self-confidence in students and in the general population. From there the audience of about 100 was allowed to ask questions concerning the schools and their facilitation of self confidence in students (this, along with collaboration and communication were the three areas Katrineholm's schools had decided they wanted to focus upon over the next few years). The board members' answers followed along their party lines, although all, I felt, would seem liberal towards education relative to Florida politicians. A former superintendent stood from his seat in the audience to express his disdain for testing, something for which some in Sweden are emulating America (School Management Institute, 1999). He said testing only lowers a child's self esteem, causing the student to learn to hate school at an early age. Children come to school, he said, with enthusiasm for learning, and school systems often crush this enthusiasm. Many Swedish educators, I found, are puzzled by Florida's focus on testing, and believe it to be a way to control the state's schools and school systems (School Management Institute, 1999).

After a forty-five minute open forum, the city manager adjourned the audience to one of five seminars held in two sessions, all presented by local

educators. I chose one on the evolution of Swedish school restructuring and another on a Danish innovation call *bifrost* that is being piloted in Katrineholm. The first session described the end of the Industrial Age and the need to prepare students for the Information Age. The presenter noted that those of us in attendance had been educated in school systems designed for the Industrial Age, preparing us for life on the assembly line. She warned that what the schools do today will seem confusing, but that we should not judge them harshly simply because we do not understand them and their purpose. The audience had no questions and comments either during or after her presentation, this may be due to their introverted nature (Svensson, 1997) or it may simply be that she was "preaching to the choir." Much of what she advocated for education in the twenty-first century I had witnessed and would witness being done in the Swedish schools: group collaboration, student-designed curriculum, student-centered classrooms and schools, and essentially complete local control (School Management Institute, 1999; Skolverket, 1997).

Five years ago, a group of seven teachers in Katrineholm developed their own school with the consent of the municipality. The second presentation I attended described *bifrost,* a system of schooling that seemed to me quite revolutionary. These seven teachers facilitated the learning of seventy students aged seven to fifteen in non-graded houses. Although they claimed that some traditional classes existed, most of the students they related were engaged in projects of their choice. One student, who had been at the school all five years, expressed her concern that she would have to go on to an upper secondary

school, perhaps losing much of her freedom and the camaraderie of the small school. She spoke of how all seventy students met *en mass* once a week to present and discuss their projects with the other students and their teachers. I could not help but be impressed by a school board meeting that trusted the audience enough to hold an open forum and was designed to educate the voting public through intelligent, interesting seminars.

A relaxed climate

When the forty education leaders from Florida visited Sweden in October 1999, we came away with an admiration for the relaxed school atmospheres we had witnessed. As one Florida principal said, "In America, we control, control, control. In Sweden, they relax, relax, relax" (School Management Institute, 1999, 127). I found this same relaxed environment in both Duveholmsskolan and Wargentinsskolan. On entering the schools, neither students nor staff appeared wary of my presence as a stranger in their schools. At first, I was led to specified classrooms so as not to get lost, but by the afternoon of the first day in each school, I was able to find my way around unescorted, free to take pictures of students in hallways and classrooms. What I found were seemingly happy teenagers lounging at unsupervised snack bars and talking amiably at locker areas. Teachers did not wait outside their classrooms dutifully watching students; in fact, teachers often did not have their own classroom, having to "float" to different rooms. This was done not out of a lack of space, but because it was felt that teachers should move as well as students—an example of their

focus on student-centeredness. Students stayed with the same group of students (a "homeroom" is how it was translated to me) throughout the year, taking many of their classes in the same room every time.

Both schools offer flexible schedules, much like an American university's. Students and teachers may have as much as two hours between classes, allowing them to utilize the student snack bars or to walk off campus to drink coffee and eat rolls at neighboring establishments. Nothing in either Katrineholm or Ostersund is more than a fifteen-minute walk from the center of town; Wargentinsskolan is situated nearly in the center of Ostersund. I asked several students why they did not skip classes since they were not compelled by law to attend and had so many places to go off campus during the day. They replied that it is their responsibility to learn, so if they were not in class, then they would be someplace else studying. Teachers told me that they "mentally" took attendance at each class, submitting a report to administration daily, although they admitted being lax about doing so. I asked what happened to students who did not attend class. Teachers replied that they failed or had difficulties, but there were no discipline consequences as in American high schools. Teachers would merely telephone the parents to let them know that their child was missing classes, but at the upper secondary level, the teachers usually speak only to the students feeling they are mature enough to deal with their own educational concerns. Administration keeps attendance records for employers wishing to hire

their schools' graduates. Teachers at both schools told me that nearly every Swedish employer asks for the transcripts given to students upon graduation from upper secondary school and are often more interested in attendance than grades.

Although teachers, administrators, and students said classes average thirty students in upper secondary schools, the ones I saw had about fifteen. Teachers, I found, allow students to work independently or in groups in computer labs, libraries, or even at home. Both Wargentinsskolan and Duveholmsskolan had many conference rooms seating eight to ten, places where teachers sent groups of students to work—without supervision. After one class I observed, a student reported to her teacher that she was not in class that day because she had been at the public library researching a topic for another subject. The teacher simply nodded, said "fine," and went back to talking with a group of students.

When entering classrooms, it was often difficult to locate the teacher as he or she was seldom at the front of the class in the "teacher ready" position. In addition, they dressed very casual, usually in jeans, tee shirt or flannel shirt. During my five days in the two schools, I saw only three men wearing ties other than myself. This casual dress along with the custom of students calling all adults by their first name helped give the schools an open, relaxed atmosphere.

Classes were scheduled to begin at specific times, but seldom did. Often teachers conversed with students several minutes into the class period before he or she asked for student attention. Most of the time, the teachers would not

officially start class; students came in and casually went to work. With no bells, class ended a few minutes before or after its scheduled time. Never did I witness "clockwatching" by students.

Students were quiet and relatively calm, even when talking with each other in the hallways. Teachers had the same demeanor. I noticed some student horseplay but never a reprimand from a teacher. It appeared that the teacher just took it in stride, assuming the student would soon be back on task, and he or she always was. I felt that there was no great need of supervision for students. My colleagues from Florida who visited Sweden with me in October also reported that older students were not supervised, and younger ones had little supervision. I wondered whether good behavior was a product of the Swedish culture or was a direct result of something taught in the schools. The wife of my host in Ostersund, who is a middle school teacher, may have answered that question. When I asked her about her seven-year old son's progress in his first year of compulsory education, she replied, "Fine, I guess." She thought for a moment, then added, "If anything were wrong, then the teachers would tell me." I knew already that report cards are rare in Sweden and that most elementary school teachers meet with parents twice a year to discuss their child's progress. She read the surprised look on my face, then explained that teachers in the early grades are not too concerned with academics but instead work diligently with the children in collaborating with others, what she referred to as "citizenship." She went on to say that it is of little use to teach a child to read and write if that child will not be able to get along with others in

society. The academics will come once the students are responsible enough to be trusted. This focus on social skills at such an early age may explain why the students in the upper secondary schools had internalized control of their behavior. (Indeed, the Swedish National Curriculum for both non-compulsory and compulsory education is value-driven versus knowledge-based. The focus is on cooperation and collaboration, and mentions little in the way of actual content that could be measured on a standardized test (Regeringskansliet, 1999a; 1999b; Sandahl, 1997)).

Many students in classes listened with headphones to CD's and several classes played music of students' choice during class time. This was especially true in the Individual Program which is the seventeenth national program instituted a couple of years ago to serve unmotivated students. The Individual Program is somewhat like the dropout prevention programs in American schools, programs designed to keep students from leaving school before graduation. In one Individual Program class, some students were playing chess, some backgammon, while others read or played games on the computer. Several wore headphones connected to CD players, proud to show me that they were listening to American music. The teacher, who referred to himself as their coach, worked at convincing them to work on math assignments or other more productive activities. He never, however, *told* them to do anything, preferring to gently coax the students to do conventional schoolwork. Most eventually did work on school assignments but did so sporadically. The fact did not escape this

teacher that the students were learning other important skills through the playing of these games.

All students and teachers took lengthy breaks between classes due in part to the nature of the class schedules and the Swedish tradition of taking coffee breaks (Svensson, 1997). Students at both schools could be seen sitting on benches conversing quietly (relative to American teenagers) or checking their e-mail at computer stations positioned throughout the campuses. Nowhere could teachers or administrators be found prodding students to stop loitering in the hallways and to get to their classes. The climate was one of happy calmness—very, very relaxed.

Trusting students to make choices

I asked students, teachers, and administrators about students' roles in creating their education plans. In a *Skolverket* publication, it is mentioned that students are required to be involved in developing these plans (1997). This I found to be true. Not only did students formally conference with their teachers about their plans, teachers gave students many options in what they could do for class credit. Most teachers at Duveholmsskolan and Wargentinsskolan gave term examinations, but I found that the type of examination to be taken (in class, in-class open-book, or take-home) was left up to the students to decide, usually by a class vote. When interviewed, students took for granted this autonomy for their education commenting little when I broached the subject. They were interested instead with the number of class choices American high school

students have (most knew either a Swede who had been an exchange student in the U.S. or knew an American exchange student who had been to Sweden). The programs, the students at both schools complained, did not offer enough choices for classes, being relatively rigid as compared to American high schools.

Student forums

I had the opportunity to be involved in five open-forum discussions with Swedish students. The most frequently discussed topics were athletics in schools (the Swedes do not have school-sponsored sports), violence in American schools, television shows watched by teenagers, the weather in Florida, and racism in both the U.S. and Sweden. The students had heard much about the Columbine High School tragedy and wanted to know what U.S. schools were doing to prevent such situations to reoccur. From this conversation invariably came a discussion of gun control in America, the Swedes finding it difficult to understand why we feel the need to own so many guns. I explained the two political viewpoints; but in one session, the Swedish students and I together concluded that the possessing of guns is deeply imbedded in the American culture. This conclusion made me think about the trust ingrained in the Swedish culture. Was the collaboration the ISC had brokered between the Swedish and American school leaders going to allow for the change desired, a change in schools to help them prepare children for the Global Village? Was there simply too much difference in cultures? After relating to my American

colleagues the tremendous trust I found during my first trip to Sweden, many felt the differences in cultures were too great for this type of education practice to be followed in the U.S. Mimicking the loose supervision found in Sweden would not work in America, they said. We cannot trust the children; once our backs are turned--they would misbehave. Due to *in loco parentis*, teachers and school districts are held responsible if students hurt themselves or others while the teachers are not directly supervising them. I related this last concern to a teacher of Swedish who had just left his students for the final hour of the class so they could conduct a class meeting (he said that they are more comfortable when he is not in attendance at these meetings as they often discuss other teachers). His reply was that they were eighteen and nineteen year olds, young adults. I agreed, but told him the American law did not care, that parents could still sue the school board if something were to happen to those students while we were having coffee and rolls in another part of campus. He, moreover, would most likely be terminated if not held legally responsible. "How can we expect them to trust others, if we do not trust them?" he asked me.

Democracy, trust, and responsibility

When discussing with one of the two Duveholmsskolan principals the fact that many teachers mentioned the word democracy in her school, both in class and in discussions with me, she said that this idea is central to my focus on trust in schools. "Democracy *is* trust; it *is* responsibility," she said. The Swedish schools I visited demonstrated that democracy was important and must be

utilized in conjunction with trust and responsibility. I asked myself, How can we American educators expect to build trust and responsibility in our schools when we feel it necessary (and are coerced by statute) to constantly supervise our students? How can we expect our students to live in a true democracy if they cannot experience trust in schools and therefore gain responsibility? *Not once in the five days I spent in Swedish classes did I witness a teacher direct a student to do something*. Obviously, responsibility had been internalized for the Swedish teenagers.

I cannot help but wonder if the emphasis on social conduct and interaction in the early years of compulsory education and the de-emphasis on grades and academics have allowed the proliferation of teacher-student trust. We American educators, who live in a state of accountability and fear of politicians who demand quantifiable evidence that we are not wasting the taxpayers' money, can learn much from the Swedish system of schooling. This system, from my observations, produces students who are responsible, due, I feel, from the trust that they are given; a responsibility that allows them to be productive members of the Global Village, a world dominated by democracy (Thurow, 1996; Friedman, 1999). Democracy, as I was reminded by the Duveholmsskolan principal demands trust as well as responsibility.

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